

has already been mentioned. To some extent the species replace each other geographically, *schoenobaenus* having a breeding range extending from Scandinavia through Europe to the Mediterranean and eastwards into Siberia, while *melanopogon* is present to the south of this. The latter species has a discontinuous distribution, one race being found around the Caspian Sea, eastwards into Turkestan, and south to Iran and Iraq, while the other has a broken distribution through southern Europe on the edge of the Mediterranean, and into north-west Africa. This suggests that the species may have had a more continuous distribution in earlier times, and have been isolated in residual areas by the increasing aridity of the Middle East and North Africa. The decrease of suitable swampy breeding areas to the south may have brought it into secondary contact with *schoenobaenus*, with which it may share a common ancestral origin, sufficient differences having evolved during isolation to ensure specific separation. At the present time the distribution of the two species is mainly allopatric in Asia, with possible sympatry in two small areas; but there is considerable sympatry in southern Europe.

CONCLUSION

From the evidence available it is considered that *Lusciniola* is not a valid and separate genus, the single species concerned not being generically separable from species in the genus *Acrocephalus*. The latter generic name having nomenclatorial priority, the specific name of the Moustached Warbler should now be *Acrocephalus melanopogon* (Temminck).

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Spotted breast variants in the European Green-winged Teal and the Northern Pintail

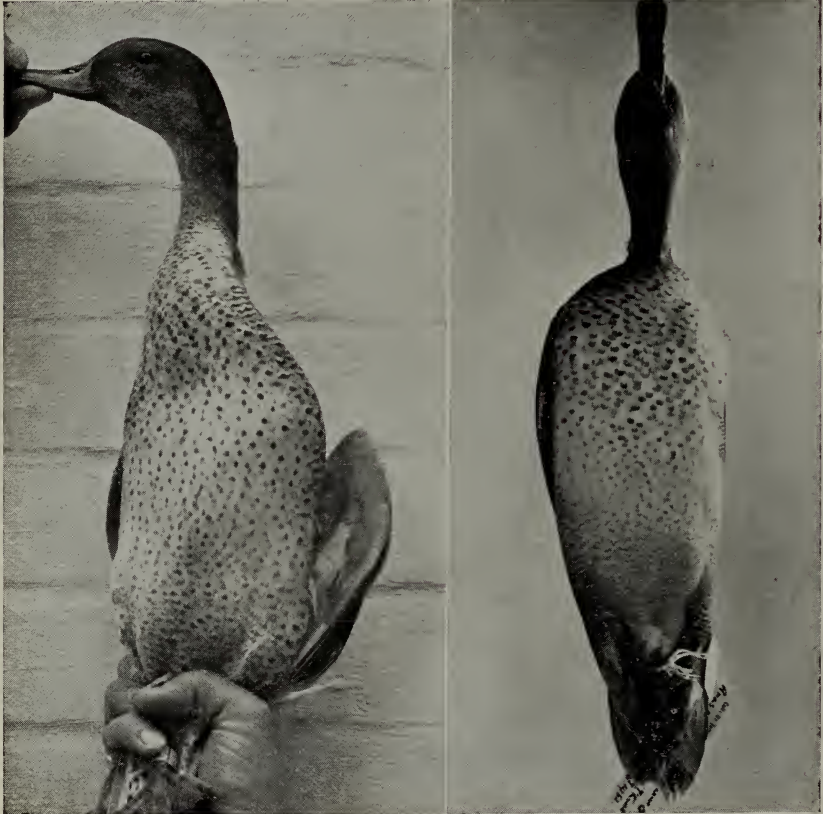
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The two specimens to be described show a striking and unusual degree of spotting of the breast. The first is a drake European Green-winged Teal *Anas crecca crecca* Linnaeus, which was shot on the Isle of Sheppey, Kent on 7th December, 1956 by J. M. H. The bird was in normal full winter plumage at the time and as it was only wing-tipped, it was kept alive with our wildfowl collection until it died on 1st June, 1962. When this happened, we were surprised to find that the entire belly was well marked with black spots, smaller than on the upper breast and merging with the grey vermiculations between the legs. While alive, this unusual plumage was not

observed, as the belly is practically impossible to see without catching the bird, so we do not know at what age the full plumage changed its character. All that can be said with certainty is that the bird was at least six years old when it died.

A drake Northern Pintail *Anas acuta acuta* Linnaeus in normal full plumage was caught alive in Essex in January, 1958. On 27th July, 1962, it was caught up when in full eclipse plumage and was found to have a marked degree of black spotting covering the breast and belly. Like the Teal, this plumage was not noticed until the bird was handled. Both were living under conditions where an abundant supply of natural food was available and this was supplemented by corn.



Left: Drake Pintail (in eclipse) with spotted breast. 27. 7. 1962.

Right: Drake Teal with spotted breast. 1. 6. 1962.

As can be seen from the plates, both of these plumages are quite different from normal. We have already recorded one similar, but less marked variant in a drake Teal (Harrison, 1946) and the same variant in two out of a series of 12 drake Gadwall *Anas strepera* Linnaeus (Harrison 1958).

The presence of spotted breasts and bellies as variants in drakes of three Holarctic duck species seems worthy of further consideration. We

believe that this variant is more primitive than others we have described, such as the frequent presence of white neck-spots and semi-rings in drake European Green-winged Teal, which we believe indicates an affinity to the Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos platyrhynchos* Linnaeus (Harrison 1961) at species level. It is a fact that the juveniles and females of many species of duck have spotted bellies and also that some species principally in the southern hemisphere, show a lack of sexual dimorphism with duck-like plumages, which Sibley (1957) attributes to lowered selection pressure against hybridisation. In discussing the Cape Shoveler *Anas smithi* (Hartert) Winterbottom and Middlemiss (1960) consider it probable that the Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata* Linnaeus diverged from *A. smithi* before the line had evolved a marked sexual dimorphism and that *A. smithi* has remained close to the ancestral form from which *A. clypeata* evolved in the north. It is our view that the occasional spotted breast in drakes of Holarctic duck species represents a reversion to this type of undifferentiated ancestral form and the presence of this variant in the eclipse plumage of the Pintail drake is particularly interesting, in view of the fact that this plumage is also likely to be reversionary, having a survival value from its cryptic coloration and being able to develop in the post-breeding season, when selection pressure against hybridisation must be at its lowest.

We are indebted to Dr. Pamela Harrison for photographing the specimens.

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A snake attack upon a weaver-bird colony.

Possible significance of synchronous breeding activity

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In the series of articles by Pitman (1958, 1962) on reptile predators of birds, there are few accounts of a snake being observed while in the act of killing a wild bird and presumably few people have ever witnessed such an encounter. We feel, therefore, that this description of a snake's attack upon a small weaver-bird colony may be of interest even though the snake was not identified.

The reactions of the birds in the colony to the marauder's visit were quite different from what one would expect. The happenings observed provoked a discussion between us leading to a hypothesis being formulated concerning the significance of synchronous nesting in weaver-bird colonies.